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CULTURE

BY WILLIAM CHASE GREENE

THAT this is the age of the child, we can no longer doubt. His pretty lisp has become our text-book; our very gospel bids us seek his smile. The old-fashioned teacher has learned to go to school that he may sit at the feet of his pupils. Nor is there any hypocrisy about the relation. We have not forgotten the proud manifesto of the pedagogue who declared, "I don't try to teach my pupils anything; I try to educate them by encouraging them to express their personalities." Indeed, in the doctrine of the Roman lady who personifies the children's movement may be recognized only a guarded application to children of the motto devised for the cultivated inmates of the Abbaye de Thélème—" *Fay ce que voudras.*" We have brought the elective system from the university to the cradle.

Yet it is not only in the school and in the nursery that the child reigns. In the theatre, in the Sunday paper and the illustrated magazine, amid the monstrous *bonhomie* of the smoking-room, one may hear his amiable prattle. But it is a serious child, grown old in the art of introspection. "Let the other fellows alone," says he, "and come and hear me talk. You know I'm not really a bad fellow; I have seen a great deal of life, and my sense of humor is sublime. As for culture, I have some of the latest ideas, including a number of my own."

Though the cult of the child has triumphed, there are still some who think it worth while to do battle for the cause. A contemporary essayist, Mr. Randolph Bourne, would have us believe that we in America are still in a state of unhappy tutelage; he calls upon us to throw aside our humility in the presence of our elders and to assert our native culture. "Let the children be heard, as well as seen," he seems to

cry. Too long we have carried the ancients upon our shoulders; let us get rid of the strangling burden. Above all, he would have us repudiate the notion, the responsibility for which he attributes largely to so recent a writer as Matthew Arnold, that culture is something that can be acquired by conformity to alien standards. In order to foster our infant culture, he would favor, one is tempted to infer, high protection against foreign culture.

The effect of Mr. Bourne's argument is seriously damaged, however, when we reflect on the small extent to which the alien culture has penetrated our life. It was not long ago that the rich man in a Western mushroom town decided to use some of his newly-earned money for the common good; Leadville should have a theatre. When he went to see the completed building, he found a large bust in the entrance hall. "Who's that?" he asked of the architect. "The bust? Oh, that's Shakespeare," was the reply. "Shakespeare? What did he do for Leadville?" he retorted with some irritation, and directed that his own photograph be set up in the place of the bust. There is a sad bit of truth in the murmur of this child. What, indeed, had Shakespeare done for Leadville? What has he done for most of us? It does not seem worth while to castigate us for offences that most of us have hardly contemplated; we do not know this alien culture too well.

Or is it the few who are leading astray the many? The academic world is accused of fostering a false ideal of culture, because of its preponderant interest in accepted classics, with its partial neglect of the modern thinkers who have not yet been canonized. This patent form of the protectionist argument assumes, what is by no means true, that forms of culture are engaged in rivalry, and that domestic production suffers from the competition of foreign brands of the same article. Of course exactly the opposite is the case; culture is not a commodity, nor can it be measured in terms of quantity. Certainly, it is "not an acquired familiarity with things outside, but an inner and constantly operating taste, a fresh and responsive power of discrimination, and the insistent judging of everything that comes to our minds and senses." Such a quality the child of genius may possess, and may develop without any assistance from without; but it has been left to our generation to discover that every child is a child of genius, and that it matters

nothing whether he make himself familiar with great works or with little. The order in which we are to appreciate works of art should proceed, we are now told, from what is contemporary and minor to what is remote and austere. True, we do not need to be reminded that, to the average man, Hecuba is less than Huckleberry Finn. But to some it will not appear absurd to suggest that one's appreciation of Huckleberry Finn may be more complete if one has already learned to know Hecuba. Moreover, the argument for beginning with the minor work is not that the understanding of what is good breeds understanding of what is better, but that for the child-like mind it is easier to be interested in what seems to be its natural environment than to journey to more distant fields. The argument is an appeal to the vanity of suburban provincialism; that is at once its weakness and its strength. For although motives of expediency may suggest that we try to build the larger interest on the foundation given us by the smaller, to convert provincialism into national or international devotion, to persuade the child to turn his attention gradually away from himself, there is at least an even chance that our attempt will be checked in mid-course. If we try to approach Dickens by way of the current magazine, we may never progress further than the works of O. Henry.

The whole appeal to the remote and the foreign is perhaps that at which Mr. Bourne lashes with most determination. The "tyranny of the 'best' objectifies all our taste," he writes; it is in opposition to "that inner taste which is the only sincere culture." Here we seem to have come to the heart of the matter; what our critic is really concerned about opposing is the "objectification" of taste. Is there then any measure of permanency in the standards of culture? It is Mr. Bourne himself who has said it; for, as he tells us, the classics in France are not a canon; "but each successive generation finds them redolent of those qualities which are characteristically French." From such a position it seems to be an exceedingly small step to the classical view of art, which believes not in a closed canon, but in various types of experience which every generation finds to be characteristically human. If there be such types of experience, we are happily done with the question of objective standards of taste; we have learned that a great book is not of perennial interest because it is a classic, rather it must be

called a classic because of its perennial interest. Further, it is France, the country that is commended for wearing her culture so lightly, that has in recent years shown the most remarkable concern about her failing hold on the culture of the past. For she has still the wit to see that what is worn lightly must yet be held securely. It is the late-learner, not the life-long scholar, who becomes the pedant.

One is therefore inclined to feel little indignation at our subservience, whatever it may have been, to the culture of the old world. If we have not mastered it to such an extent that it is no longer a burden, we can not have made it our own to an excessive degree. We need not be afraid of knowing the old world too well; if such knowledge crushes our individuality, it must be an individuality unworthy of preservation. And to resent friendly comparison with the old culture must be the mark either of cowardice or of churlishness. If we have produced thinkers of power and originality, as indeed we have done, we need not fear the co-operation of others.

Such an ideal by no means involves a quantitative notion of culture. A new book read, a new friendship gained, these mean more than numerical accessions to a catalogue of experiences; they mean that all the past and all the future must be surveyed in a new light. The prejudice against the "tyranny of the 'best'" is an academic phase of the child's unwillingness to learn from the experience of others. A contemporary critic has reminded the world that "*on ne peut pas porter partout avec soi le cadavre de son père.*" Never was a witty saying more false. We all carry with us, wherever we go, the bodies of our fathers, not, it is true, lifeless and on our shoulders, but living within us, wrought into the fibre of our being. And we could more easily walk without our ancestral bones than we could get rid of the heritage of culture which is ours by right, and which encumbers us only because we have not learned to take it for granted. It is ours because, try as we will, we can not get rid of the common humanity that is the fountain of all culture. We may ignore it for a time; it may take a burned child to make a wise child. But whether we learn by education or by intuition or by the buffets of hard experience, we must come to recognize, sooner or later, the social character of all true culture; and then in a kind of humility that is akin to pride we shall subscribe to a declaration of dependence.

If we bear in ourselves at every step the bodies of our fathers, we are nevertheless at all times something more than reincarnations of them. Not only do we live their old lives anew, but we make them our own by our constant discovery of new meaning in the experience that is both theirs and ours. Nevertheless, there is no absolute gap between the old and the new, no point at which humanity must stand still, unable to comprehend itself. The genius that planned the Parthenon is not the same as that which shaped the Cathedral of Chartres; neither are the two immeasurably removed one from the other.

It may be that we lose something by caring a little, if we do care, for the immemorial forms of beauty and of life. It may be that a perverse interest in the dead has blinded us to the living; it may be that we have been too ready to regard the genius in our midst as a mere freak. Such a misfortune is not impossible; to many it will not appear imminent. To many we seem far more ready to hail the freak as a genius, to elaborate fads into solemn dogma, to humor each fancy of the eternal child. Few things, it is true, are more delightful to watch than the spontaneous dance of children, if it be unhampered by the prompting of older folk. Some serious-minded people maintain quite literally that the child's dance should be the model of all art, simply because it is a free and unpremeditated expression of joy. If we could remain children all our lives, the free and unpremeditated expression of joy might remain our highest form of art; certainly, it is a pity ever to outgrow the love of it. Yet if our faith in the cult of the child is shaken, if the horizon of the nursery window seems to grow, we can not forever find the same delight in the dance of the nursery. The mature dance of the ballroom is doubtless an imperfect expression of joy. Yet it may have graces of its own; nor should we ever forget that it is not the lady that has danced her half-score of seasons, but the school-boy, who is annoyed by its conventions, and who finds his feet "in the way."

That our national culture should be characteristically American, may be important; it is of far greater importance that it shall be the expression of our interest in common humanity. Further, a mature and well-balanced interest in humanity, and that is what the distressing word "culture" means, is of necessity a personal matter; one can not be

interested in anything by proxy. Any artist who is worthy of consideration expresses what he himself feels, whatever his feelings may be : in the same way, the public, unless it has a greater power of self-deception than one is inclined to believe possible, will for no long time profess a regard for something that it despises. The danger of our generation is not a prejudice in favor of an imagined " best," but a tendency to assume that all our judgments have the finality of the Last Judgment. Is it not better to test, without prejudice or arrogance, the worth of many types of experience? It seems fruitless to reproach any man for having found his interest in humanity by devious paths. Wherever he may have found it, however strange the manner of his quest, if it is in itself valuable, and if he has made it his own, that is all that we have a right to ask.

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